The Misanthropic Altruist and Compulsive Giver

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Some narcissists are ostentatiously generous – they donate to charity, lavish gifts on their closest, abundantly provide for their nearest and dearest, and, in general, are open-handed and unstintingly benevolent. How can this be reconciled with the pronounced lack of empathy and with the pernicious self-preoccupation that is so typical of narcissists?

The act of giving enhances the narcissist's sense of omnipotence, his fantastic grandiosity, and the contempt he holds for others. It is easy to feel superior to the supplicating recipients of one's largesse. Narcissistic altruism is about exerting control and maintaining it by fostering dependence in the beneficiaries.

But narcissists give for other reasons as well.

The narcissist flaunts his charitable nature as a bait. He impresses others with his selflessness and kindness and thus lures them into his lair, entraps them, and manipulates and brainwashes them into subservient compliance and obsequious collaboration. People are attracted to the narcissist's larger than life posture – only to discover his true personality traits when it is far too late. "Give a little to take a lot" – is the narcissist's creed.

This does not prevent the narcissist from assuming the role of the exploited victim. Narcissists always complain that life and people are unfair to them and that they invest far more than their "share of the profit". The narcissist feels that he is the sacrificial lamb, the scapegoat, and that his relationships are asymmetric and imbalanced. "She gets out of our marriage far more than I do" – is a common refrain. Or: "I do all the work around here – and they get all the perks and benefits!"

Faced with such (mis)perceived injustice – and once the relationship is clinched and the victim is "hooked" – the narcissist tries to minimise his contributions. He regards his input as a contractual maintenance chore and the unpleasant and inevitable price he has to pay for his Narcissistic Supply.

After many years of feeling deprived and wronged, some narcissists lapse into "sadistic generosity" or "sadistic altruism". They use their giving as a weapon to taunt and torment the needy and to humiliate them. In the distorted thinking of the narcissist, donating money gives him the right and license to hurt, chastise, criticise, and berate the recipient. His generosity, feels the narcissist, elevates him to a higher moral ground.

Most narcissists confine their giving to money and material goods. Their munificence is an abusive defence mechanism, intended to avoid real intimacy. Their "big-hearted" charity renders all their relationships – even with their spouses and children – "business-like", structured, limited, minimal, non-emotional, unambiguous, and non-ambivalent. By doling out bounteously, the narcissist "knows where he stands" and does not feel threatened by demands for commitment, emotional investment, empathy, or intimacy.

In the narcissist's wasteland of a life, even his benevolence is spiteful, sadistic, punitive, and distancing.

There are two types of narcissists: (I) Stingy and mean and (II) compulsive givers. Most narcissists feel abused and exploited when they have to pay money in order to satisfy the needs and wishes of their "nearest" and "dearest".

Not so the compulsive givers.

To all appearances, the compulsive giver is an altruistic, empathic, and caring person. Actually, he or she is a people-pleaser and a codependent. The compulsive giver is trapped in a narrative of his own confabulation: how his nearest and dearest need him because they are poor, young, inexperienced, lacking in intelligence or good looks, and are otherwise inferior to him. Compulsive giving, therefore, involves pathological narcissism.

In reality, it is the compulsive giver who coerces, cajoles, and tempts people around him to avail themselves of his services or money. He forces himself on the recipients of his ostentatious largesse and the beneficiaries of his generosity or magnanimity. He is unable to deny anyone their wishes or a requests, even when these are not explicit or expressed and are mere figments of his own neediness and grandiose imagination.

Inevitably, he develops unrealistic expectations. He feels that people should be immensely grateful to him and that their gratitude should translate into a kind of obsequiousness. Internally, he seethes and rages against the lack of reciprocity he perceives in his relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. He mutely castigates everyone around him for being so ungenerous. To the compulsive giver, giving is perceived as sacrifice and taking is exploitation. Thus, he gives without grace, always with visible strings attached. No wonder he is always frustrated and often aggressive.

In psychological jargon, we would say that the compulsive giver has alloplastic defenses with an external locus of control. This simply means that he relies on input from people around him to regulate his fluctuating sense of self-worth, his precarious self-esteem, and his ever shifting moods. It also means that he blames the world for his failures. He feels imprisoned in a hostile and mystifying universe, entirely unable to influence events, circumstances, and outcomes. He thus avoids assuming responsibility for the consequences of his actions.

Yet, it is important to realize that the compulsive giver cherishes and relishes his self-conferred victimhood and nurtures his grudges by maintaining a meticulous accounting of everything he gives and receives. This mental operation of masochistic bookkeeping is a background process of which the compulsive giver is sometimes unaware. He is likely to vehemently deny such meanness and narrow-mindedness.

The compulsive giver is an artist of projective identification. He manipulates his closest into behaving exactly the way he expects them to. He keeps lying to them and telling them that the act of giving is the only reward he seeks. All the while he secretly yearns for reciprocity. He rejects any attempt to rob him of his sacrificial status - he won't accept gifts or money and he avoids being the recipient or beneficiary of help or compliments. These false asceticism and fake modesty are mere baits. He uses them to prove to himself that his nearest and dearest are nasty ingrates. "If they wanted to (give me a present or help me), they would have insisted" - he bellows triumphantly, his worst fears and suspicions yet again confirmed.

Gradually, people fall into line. They begin to feel that they are the ones who are doing the compulsive giver a favor by succumbing to his endless and overweening charity. "What can we do?" - they sigh - "It means so much to him and he has put so much effort into it! I just couldn't say no." The roles are reversed and everyone is happy: the beneficiaries benefit and the compulsive giver goes on feeling that the world is unjust and people are self-centered exploiters. As he always suspected.

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